

Garamendi talks student fees, green jobs

California Aggie

October 6, 2008

By Jeremy Ogul

Fees and tuition at California colleges are rising rapidly, and California Lieutenant Governor John Garamendi says it's up to students to change that.

Garamendi spoke at a Davis College Democrats rally on campus on Friday in front of an audience of about 85 people. He gave a rousing and energetic speech touching on national and regional political issues, including the federal Wall Street bailout and the state budget deal.

The main focus of his message, however, was the impact that student fee increases are having on California's higher education system.

"A free public education no longer exists in California," he said. "The taxes that were increased in this [state] budget were miniscule except for one. The single biggest tax increase was a tax on students."

In an interview with The Aggie after the rally, Garamendi tied fee increases to the health of the state's economy.

"The ever-increasing fees are keeping qualified students out of the university," he said. "Ten thousand young men and women did not enter the state university system this fall because there was inadequate funding. Four years from now those are 10,000 engineers, nurses, teachers, social workers, philosophers, writers, journalists who will not be available to work in

the California economy."

Garamendi, who is also a UC Regent, said the only way to stop fee increases was for students to stand up for themselves.

"Right now the trustees at the CSU system and the regents are taxing the students," he said. "The students need to rise up and raise hell. If that doesn't happen then this fee increase will continue."

The state's economy depends on a highly educated workforce, he said, and the seventh wealthiest economy in the world should be able to afford to educate its workforce.

In his speech at the rally, Garamendi also talked about the presidential election and what is at stake.

"You look back on the recent history of this nation and it is common that the vice president becomes the president," he said. "When a person makes a choice about who they choose to be their successor ... you're making a statement about your values as president. You're making a statement about how you perceive the nation's future."

ASUCD Senator Tracey Zeng was in the audience at the rally and said she agreed with what the lieutenant governor had to say.

"I thought what he said about prioritizing students is absolutely crucial in this election," she said.

Zeng, who also works with CalPIRG, said students need to get more involved.

"[We need] to ensure students show politicians that they can't put students in the position of choosing between rent and tuition."

Garamendi announced in July that he would run for governor of California in 2010, when Arnold Schwarzenegger's term expires. He is currently on a statewide "listening tour" of California college campuses to find out what issues are most important to students.

Also speaking at the rally were state Representative Lois Wolk (D-Davis) who is running for a seat in the state senate, and Yolo County supervisor Mariko Yamada, who is running for Wolk's spot in the state assembly.

Wolk, who faces a particularly competitive race for the open senate seat, criticized opponent Greg Aghazarian, also a state Representative.

"I am running in the senate against someone who won't even mention the fact that he's a Republican," she said. "He won't mention his party. He's not proud he's a Republican."

She went on to list a series of bills opposed by Republicans in the state legislature recently, including flood protection for Central Valley homeowners and an effort to ban lead from candy.

More excerpts from interview with California Lieutenant Governor John Garamendi:

On student fees and the cost of higher education

The California economy and society was really built on the best free public education system in the world. The result of [fee increases] is that many middle income students and low income students don't get into the university of California. The ever increasing fees are keeping qualified students out of the university.

Now, the fact is that the continuation of this will harm our economy and pull the rungs out of the economic ladder for young men and women in the state. It's called a fee but in reality it is a tax. Instead of raising the revenue to support the university from the wealth of the economy — that is, the overall wealth of the economy — the money is extracted directly from the students and the families that attend the university.

It's a tax, plain and simple, and it is a particularly stupid tax. It literally is akin to eating your seed corn, which is not a good thing to do. The state is not supporting the universities. That's a starvation diet.

To address that the university has turned to the students. Two bad things happened. One, students can't afford it, they end their college experience with a large amount of debt, and their ability to enter fields of service is limited because they've got to pay off their debt. In addition to that you wind up with a lot of students not going to school that otherwise would have.

Right now the trustees at the CSU system and the regents are taxing the students. The legislature and the governor must be faced with the question. The students need to rise up and raise hell. If that doesn't happen then this fee increase will continue. We did a rally last year; we had about 3000 students march on the capitol, and we're gonna have to do that again.

Two and a half million Californians are in college campuses right now. That's just a little less than 8 percent, and those are just the students. Most of the students have two relatives who may actually be paying for their education.

The impact of education budget cuts on the economy

The important thing is that the economy and society depend upon a highly educated workforce. A highly educated workforce is the only way to continue the strength of the California economy, and when you raise fees, you eliminate students. And when you refuse to pay for the education, as the legislature and governor did this year, you deny opportunity to students and therefore hurt the California economy. Ten thousand young men and women did not enter the state university system this fall because there was inadequate funding. Four years from now those are 10,000 engineers, nurses, teachers, social workers, philosophers, writers, journalists who will not be available to work in the California economy.

The seventh wealthiest economy in the world can afford to educate its workforce. I know that if I were asked to pay an additional 10 percent, I would be upset, and that's what's gonna happen. The governor is already discussing an additional 10 percent fee increase, the Regents are already discussing an additional fee increase this year. If I were a student, I'd be marching on the capitol. I'd be organizing. I'd certainly be voting in this year's election. And since I care a lot about students, we're gonna help organize students.

On the Lt. Gov.'s readiness for his upcoming campaign for governor

I've won six statewide races. I know how to campaign and I know how to win. In the intervening years I was able to acquire additional experience and knowledge. In the 1980s [I was] majority leader of the senate... working on the budgets as one of the members of the conference committee.

I'm ready to be governor. I've got the experience that no other candidate has. Jerry Brown's been governor, fine. He's never worked in Washington. And neither have the mayors. They're good people — they're all good people. I've got experience and understanding and knowledge, and I'm prepared to lead, and that's necessary.

On how to solve California's budget problems

We knew in January of this year that there was going to be a severe deficit, a severe budget problem. You have to begin working immediately with legislature to seek a solution. Gov. Schwarzenegger didn't do that, nor did the legislature work together to seek a solution to really get ahead of the problem and to begin the day-to-day work of finding a solution. Now, they came together in February and they did emergency cuts, but those were all cuts. And those cuts, some of them were ephemeral. They really didn't cut, they just changed the accounting schemes.

Anyway, you've got to start in January to build the compromise that you're going to need in June to put a budget together. The governor really waited until August to develop a compromise, and the negotiations really didn't begin until August — the serious negotiations to fix the budget problems.

As governor, you've got to force the negotiations. I've said this many times. You invite the legislative leaders to the office, lock the doors, put the coffee on, put the bedrolls out, and when it's done they can leave. That's just a matter of forcing the issue. You don't wait until August to do that, or September, which is what the governor basically did.

You've got to go to the public. You've got to tell them the truth, and the fact of the matter is we have a structural deficit caused by the elimination of the car tax. Gov. Schwarzenegger's first day in office eliminated the car tax and caused the budget deficit that has plagued his administration for five years. So, you need to develop a package of revenues that addresses that problem. Again, that's the knowledge and scale of understanding what kind of revenues would be sufficient and would actually help rather than harm the California economy.

On climate change and the future

Among the many issues that confront California is the climate change issue, and with a lot of credit to Gov. Schwarzenegger, he has been a true international leader on climate change, both in raising the alarm and in developing solutions. This, however, is only the beginning and only the first steps of what we're going to have to do in California to address this issue. We have to reduce our greenhouse gas emissions, and secondly, we have to adapt to the inevitable changes.

The adaptation occurs in water systems, healthcare systems, public health, flood, sanitation. We're going to have an extraordinary cost associated with the rising sea level. You'll have heavy costs and needs in the area of public health as tropical diseases find their way into California.

The other side is on the reduction of greenhouse gases. 2.5 million Californians are on college campuses. Those campuses need to be green. So we need to push the Regents to green the campuses.

We have to prepare the work force. The engineers, the researchers, yes; but also the mechanics, the electricians, the plumbers that are going to be necessary to do the conservation systems on campuses, in homes and businesses, as well as build the new energy systems, whether those are biofuels or solar and wind. The green jobs are exceedingly important. The

college campuses are an exceptionally important place for the education of tomorrow's work force for these green jobs. And we're talking about tens of thousands of men and women that need to be trained — some with postdoctoral training, some with apprenticeship training as plumbers.

Just for example, if you're going to do a biofuel ethanol plant, you're talking about serious plumbing, serious welding, electrical systems, carpentry systems, all of which we need highly skilled men and women to do those tasks. It's not just the financier, it's not just the engineer that may design the system, but the people to build those systems, people to maintain the wind turbines. There will be thousands of wind turbines, and these are big machines. Like an automobile, somebody needs to go up there and make sure the oil's in the gears, or the electrical systems are working. This will be a major task.

[We need funding for] career technical education in high school and in the community colleges. Expansion of engineering programs at UC Davis and so forth. We have to educate the workforce, and in order to do that well we have to integrate the business community into the education system so that the education is relevant to the needs of the business community, so that the engineering is not about 18th century or 19th century production, it's about 21st century production, so it becomes relevant to the needs of the economy.

On high speed rail

In 1988 Assemblyman Jerry Costa and Senator John Garamendi offered the first laws for establishing a high speed rail system. I've supported it ever since.

JEREMY OGUL can be reached at city@californiaaggie.com .